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and Janiece Johnson
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- Abstract** The current editors look forward to increased scholarly conversations about the Book of Mormon among Latter-day Saint and non-Latter-day Saint academics of various disciplines. They suggest that researchers more fully take into account recent work on a given topic and recommend sponsoring new work from a variety of perspectives and disciplines and producing handbooks and commentaries on the Book of Mormon.
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Next year, in 2017, a half a century will have passed since Nibley’s *Since Cumorah* first appeared in print. And it has become more and more apparent that something has changed in the academy, most visibly in the past fifteen or so years. It certainly must be said that what Nibley calls “the Book of Mormon hypothesis”—that is, the claim that “the Book of Mormon contains genuine history,” along with its corollary that “the work was divinely inspired”²—continues to be largely ignored by scholars who do not accept the book’s truth on faith. But there has nonetheless begun to appear in the larger academy a growing interest in understanding the textual complexities that give force to the Book of Mormon. Many previous scholars, both LDS and non-LDS, have spurred on this more general conversation and have worked to bring the Book of Mormon to the academy. Already in the 1970s Truman Madsen invited major non-LDS scholars to offer reflections on the Book of Mormon in significant conferences and symposia; the resulting publications continued to stimulate new work on the relationship between the Book of Mormon and the Bible. During the same years, Robert Matthews opened a friendly correspondence with the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (now Community of Christ), which laid the groundwork for subsequent study of the printer’s manuscript of the Book of Mormon. In the 1980s and 1990s, various scholars, most of them associated with the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies and many in connection with the *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* itself, continued serious study of the Book of Mormon. Scholars like John Welch and Dan Peterson thus helped to build other bridges and to start other conversations that have continued into the

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present. All this hard work has begun in recent years to culminate in a wider reception for the Book of Mormon in the academy.

The Book of Mormon certainly still awaits the appropriate “vigorous onslaught” Nibley hoped for, but it can no longer be said that it receives “only a long monotonous drizzle of authoritarian denunciation.” Twenty-five years after the inaugural issue of the *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* was published, scholarly conversations about the Book of Mormon among Latter-day Saint and non-Latter-day Saint academics of various disciplines have become an established—if nonetheless still minor—part of the academy. The Book of Mormon is now beginning to find a general academic audience willing to reconsider what it has to say to the modern world.

The publication of the twenty-fifth volume of the *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* has given us, as an editorial team, reason not only to reflect on what has happened in the fifty years since Nibley published *Since Cumorah*, including what has happened in the twenty-five years since the *Journal* began to circulate, but it has also caused us to reflect on the kinds of scholarly works that might be productively pursued over the next twenty-five or fifty years, especially given the more open climate to Book of Mormon studies. In this “prospective,” coupled with the “retrospective” that precedes it, we wish to outline a few things we believe could greatly benefit the field of Book of Mormon studies over the next twenty-five to fifty years. We pretend to nothing more than human insight. But we see a few specific needs that if addressed would help to promote a more robust and deeper study of the Book of Mormon. We also hope to call for more collaborative efforts to productively study the Book of Mormon, the kind of collaboration that will foster a real interest in work on the Book of Mormon within the larger academy. Where the trend has been toward individual projects and occasional research, we hope to spur longer-term joint efforts and collaborative research that opens up more avenues of study and lays a foundation for the best possible work on the Book of Mormon going forward.

We invite interested scholars, whatever their convictions, to contribute by producing excellent work on the Book of Mormon.

Taking stock of past work

The past several decades—the 1990s especially—were intensely productive for academic study of the Book of Mormon. John Welch has recently headed up an important service to students of the Book of Mormon in creating a website (called the Book of Mormon Central and located at bookofmormoncentral.org) where much of the past scholarly work on the Book of Mormon is being gathered into one place. With all that has been produced on the Book of Mormon, there still remains an urgent need to carefully sift through past scholarship to decide what should be part of the future of Book of Mormon studies.

Unfortunately, uneven and disparate scholarly work, combined with a general lack of consensus on what is most central to Book of Mormon studies, has inhibited finding some of the best recent work on the Book of Mormon. Many readers of the Book of Mormon have too often been disappointed when trying to locate what has been written on their particular topics of interest. Such scholars need to have available to them helpful resources that will quickly guide them to materials they absolutely must have on whatever subject they wish to address. To accomplish this task it is imperative to begin taking stock, preferably through collaborative efforts, to determine what precisely has been done on the Book of Mormon. Important questions might include: What articles and essays have appeared outside the mainstream of Mormon studies that may have important or productive things to say about the Book of Mormon? What should we consider to be the most important articles published in the *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*? And why? What articles appearing in *BYU Studies*, the *Interpreter*, the *Religious Educator*, the *Journal of Mormon History*, *Dialogue*, and other journals dealing with the Book of Mormon should receive much more regular and sustained attention than they are currently receiving? What book chapters from various publications deserve to be remembered and built upon? And, of course, which scholarly books written on the Book of Mormon should be known about and read by anyone interested in pursuing serious academic study of the book?

Perhaps there has been too much reinventing the wheel in Book of Mormon studies. But how will we ever know unless we sense the urgency to make a serious collaborative effort to draw together the best available work and make its importance known to any and all students and scholars of the Book of Mormon? Certainly critical reflection of this kind would have profound and meaningful effects on the future direction of Book of Mormon studies.

Sponsoring new work

For the most part, work on the Book of Mormon has been driven by a relatively small set of questions and undertaken by scholars working within a relatively small set of disciplines. Thanks to the towering influence of Hugh Nibley, the vast majority of writings on the Book of Mormon have been written with the purpose of defending the historicity of the book. This is true of writings coming from scholars with training or interests either in ancient studies or in nineteenth-century history. Unfortunately, the production of such work has slowed considerably over the past decade. Yet the good news is that this slowing has opened the door for asking a wider range of questions. Ideally, of course, it would be far better if historical-critical work on the Book of Mormon proceeded apace with scholars working in other disciplines as well. Indeed, the field of Book of Mormon studies has ample room to encourage great work on the Book of Mormon from a variety of perspectives and disciplines, including the so-called “traditional” work.

In our view, a few disciplines and perspectives might be especially useful to Book of Mormon studies over the next few decades. For instance, even though there have been occasional literary studies of the Book of Mormon, we think that much more could still be done. Recently, major literary studies of the Book of Mormon have revealed how little we know about this approach and how much it could yet yield. While little has been done comparing the Book of Mormon text in deep and probing ways with texts from other world scripture, we think it promises to be quite a fruitful field of study. This kind of research

would have the additional benefit of placing the Book of Mormon in conversation with other scriptural traditions, which in turn would help draw the attention of a great many more scholars to the depth and richness of the book. Comparative studies of the Book of Mormon could also include investigating its complicated relationship with the Bible. Further, although founding editor Stephen Ricks called for serious theological study of the Book of Mormon, such a trend has only begun to emerge recently and has already revealed its fruitfulness. More and better-trained theologians could be working to produce close readings of the Book of Mormon and show how it might speak to persistently important questions central to philosophy and theology. Work on the critical text of the Book of Mormon has been going on for many years, primarily by one person, Royal Skousen. Other interested and qualified scholars need to seriously build on Skousen's stellar work.

Handbooks and commentaries

Producing handbooks and commentaries could be another helpful way to sift through the massive work that has already been done on the Book of Mormon and, additionally, such works could stimulate the kind of study that still needs to be done. From time to time commentaries of various sorts emerge on the Book of Mormon, but very few of them draw on the available literature, and none of them seem to make note of textual passages that require further study. It would be especially useful to have a summary commentary on the Book of Mormon that brings together the best work of the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, clearly pointing out along the way the major lacunae in the research. Also, a relatively simple exegetical commentary on the Book of Mormon, perhaps along the lines of a popular Bible study edition, would give both students and interested non-Mormons a place to start.

In a similar vein, we need to explore the possibility of producing handbooks on various parts or aspects of the Book of Mormon. Volumes modeled on the Oxford Shakespeare series or Norton's critical editions might be issued on individual books in the Book of Mormon,

providing a solid introduction, a critical apparatus, an appendix that anthologizes particularly important secondary literature, and a selective bibliography. There could be short handbooks addressing specific aspects of the Book of Mormon—geography, for instance, or establishing the critical text—in imitation of the “Guides to Biblical Scholarship” published by Fortress Press. These could help scholars and laypersons develop a quick sense for the state of a given subfield that interests them. Handbooks such as these might especially help to spur more interesting and productive work on the Book of Mormon.

Obviously, these suggestions represent only a few of the directions Book of Mormon studies could go, and these should be pursued alongside rather than in the place of the sort of work that has been done in the past. There are undoubtedly many more ways to take stock of the great work that has been done on the Book of Mormon, as well as to help promote further work on the book. These, however, are a few ideas we see that could be particularly fruitful possibilities.

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